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Running the Perfect Fantasy Campaign!

by Mike Stackpole

Most people buying a fantasy roleplaying game assume that when they get home and open the box they can immediately begin playing. This is true, to a limited extent, with most games. When I pick up a new system I create two characters and have them start bashing each other. I've always assumed that if I can understand the game system enough to kill something, I can always survive the game.

Unfortunately that is not all there is to fantasy gaming, especially to what the best fantasy gaming can be. The methods described below are meant for use in designing a full-blown fantasy campaign, but they apply equally well to science fiction, modern or superhero campaigns. They will let you create, and more importantly sustain, a game campaign that will provide you with hours, even years, of play and enjoyment.

Most players have an idea of what a campaign is, but have never really had a firm grip on it. Many fantasy games on the market are woefully inadequate at describing what a campaign is and how to create one. Simply put, a campaign is a framework, centered on a created world, into which many different encounters, adventures and quests can be set. The outcome of any adventure should affect the world at large, and the world in turn should live and move around the characters and affect them.

An example will help clarify this concept. You and your band of adventurers were hired to enter a tomb and get back the Amulet of Tarkesh. All you know about it is that some person you suspect to be a disinherited noble paid you a large amount of money to get the jewel-encrusted gold brooch. You succeed, get paid, and the noble vanishes.

Sitting in a tavern - what else do adventurers do between adventures? - you hear a bard sing of the neighboring kingdom of Sonalogn. His song mentions a dark prophecy about the current dynasty, a civil war and the Amulet of Tarkesh. Even a warrior with too many dents in his helmet could figure out that trouble will soon be brewing in Sonalogn.

Here the characters have, in a simple dungeon delve, done something that will affect the world. In the grand scheme of things Sonalogn could be a very small nation, and its collapse could mean little or nothing. Or Sonalogn could be the linchpin in plans for greater conquests by a secret cabal of sorcerers.

If the characters decide to go after the noble and get the Amulet back because they don't want the kingdom to fall, or because they believe someone else will pay more for it, their actions will once again influence events in the world.

So far this all seems easy, right? In some ways it is. The example is fairly standard and has been used time and time again - because it works. We'll go into that more, in the section concerning plots. But we need to start from the beginning.

Fantasy gaming, and roleplaying in general, have been described as cooperative storytelling. In fact, they are more like improvisational theater, where people have definite characters and are given a plot to act through. The first thing needed for your joint drama is a set, which we will call the world.

World Design

God took only six days to create the world. He works fast, because He understands the infinite connections that make up a world. The rest of us have to discover and work them through. Every world I've ever created took far longer, even when I was doing it full-time for Blade.

Let there be map!

I always start with a map. I sit down with a piece of paper and a clipboard (a clipboard is an invaluable tool in world design!) and begin to sketch. I draw in oceans and little nations, much like a map of Europe before Germany was unified. I have lots of little nations, and assume they divide into provinces, duchies, counties and baronies smaller still. I also put islands in all over the place. I like islands.

Naming countries comes next, and can be a bother. After I run out of names that roll easily off my tongue, I am forced to resort to artificial means of naming countries. I yank out a world atlas and turn to the index, where there are names of rivers, cities, countries and mountains. Some sound good enough to pull into my world without alteration. Others, like Cleveland, will not fit unless I mangle them. I mangle them.

One thing I would like to point out, when it comes to naming cities, is that our world has come up with a great number of ways to name a city. Town, -ton, -boro, -borough, -by, -stan, -abad, -pur, -ville, -opolis, City and other such suffixes added on to the name of the discoverer, a local river or a concept (like All American City) work perfectly together to name cities. Altering the suffixes, using -ton and -ville in one part of the world and -abad or some other suffix in another, can signal a change of culture in your world much as it does in ours. You can even create your own suffixes to make your world unique.

The last thing I do when creating a map is to decide which nation is the paragon of virtue in the world, and which nation is horrible, evil and mean.

I want them on opposite ends of the world, for simplicity's sake, and I make sure their names sound good or evil.

One final note on maps is appropriate. Once, when I had nothing better to do and I needed to get a handle on the geography of the world, I created a relief map. I used corrugated cardboard and created depressions for the oceans and used several layers of the stuff for the mountains. It gave me a grasp of why certain nations had not been conquered (lots of mountains between them and neighbors) and why the savage desert raiders had never taken over more fertile land. It worked nicely, and really gave me a feel of reality as far as the world was concerned. With the mountains in place, it also showed me where the rivers had to run.

Races

Now that you have made your maps and named your nations, you probably want to start figuring out who lives there. Back up a step. Figure out *what* lives in your world first.

Humans. You have to have humans because, well, someone has to do the hard work in the world. It is impressive when a human becomes a hero because humans are generally so average. Besides, without humans, none of the more exotic races are interesting. Remember that humans come in a variety of shapes, colors and sizes. Not everyone is 6' 2", blond and blue-eyed. Vary the physical characteristics of your humans and scatter them across your map. Use our world as a guide for what physical types are likely to appear in which climates.

Elves and Dwarves. In addition to humans, these races are also standard to most fantasy worlds. For Elves, of course, you need vast tracts of forest so they can have a home. You should also toss in a Holy Glade or two just so there is a place of absolute serenity and beauty somewhere in the world. After all, with all the dungeon delvers wandering around reducing monsters and such to chopped meat, someone has to actively maintain something of beauty in the world.

Elves are tall, thin and beautiful. They live long lives. They like trees, plants and furry animals, and they are disgustingly dexterous. They're a mix of Cherokee woodcraft, Watusi dimensions and Oxford education - utterly without redeeming social characteristics. In my world I changed them.

In my world Elves come in two flavors. Your tall, willowy, educated types are the Aelves. They live in vast living-tree cities. They are great practitioners of the magical arts. They are beautiful, and stories tell of human heroes falling in love with an Aelven princess or two. Of course all this is rumor because very few people have ever met an Aelf. When normal folks wander into the woods, looking for Aelves or anything else, they don't find them.

They find trouble. They find the Xne'kal.

Racially the Xne'kal are Aelves. They have that same long, lean body, large eyes for seeing well at night or in dark forests, and very pale skin due to the same conditions that gave them their large eyes. Xne'kal also have bad attitudes. They are highly xenophobic and tend to believe that the only good trespasser in the forests is a dead trespasser. The handful of people who have survived Xne'kal attack have never asked why the Xne'kal hate outsiders, and the Xne'kal have never bothered to mention the reason.

(That's a hook, gang, and will be covered in the section on plots, below.)

If Elves mean forests, Dwarves mean mountains. Dwarves, in general, are tough little buggers who wield incredibly large battle axes, are harder to kill than cockroaches, and look like they have no conception of razors or shaving. While I feel they don't shave for environmental reasons - would

you want to shave in a polished silver mirror in the dark? - and though I reject the concept that Dwarven women are bearded, I like Dwarves. To me, Dwarves are much more concrete and understandable than Elves. They are much more grim and they understand reality. My Dwarves are worldly-wise, as opposed to the spiritual wisdom of Elves.

I leave Dwarves alone. I make them rare because many players just power-game Dwarves, using only their strength and toughness. Sure, I once had a Dwarf named Waring-Blender, but only as a joke, and I played him as being a lot more conservative and sober than his name might imply.

Aside from the two standard races mentioned above, I decided I wanted two other races that don't often appear in fantasy games. While these last two races round out the major races in my game, other races are not excluded. In fact, they just might be out there waiting to be discovered.

I've always found evil humans more effective than Orcs for preying upon villages and farms. A cry of "Bandits!" is just as likely to be heard in my world as "Orcs!" is in most others. Still, there is a need for "evil" races; I have no problem with that. After all, when it is time for a good, old-fashioned slugfest, there is nothing like a "mindless race you can slaughter hour after hour and they keep coming" to throw at the party.

Hence the Dhesiri were born. Dhesiri can best be described as Goblins. They are small and reptilian with sharp claws and little teeth. At least the worker Dhesiri are. You also have warrior Dhesiri, standing over six feet tall, about 300 pounds of dragon-man with little more than a rudimentary intelligence. Lastly you have the Dhesiri Queen, one per warren, that is nothing more than a giant, bloated Gila monster that eats constantly and produces eggs around the clock. Dhesiri live in warrens very similar to ant colonies, and have a nasty habit of tunneling up underneath roads as an ambush tactic. They are meat eaters, though they prefer horses to humans.

A worker Dhesiri can carry only one thought in his head at a time. If a party member is silent and well-hidden, a worker on a mission will overlook him. That does not mean much, given that workers are only three or four feet tall and die very, very easily, but it is a facet of the creatures that makes them real, and supplies an observant player with more than one way to deal with them.

The other race I created was the Fealareen. Fealareen warriors are humanoid. They stand over 6'8" as an average, though some have reached eight or nine feet in height in recorded history. Their skin is gray-green, their hair is jet-black and they have fangs two to three inches long that overlap their lower lips. The Fealareen are magically restrained from leaving their home mountains, and in fact only one Fealareen is outside the mountains.

Since humans trapped the Fealareen in the mountains, to hear the Fealareen tell it, the Fealareen have no love for humans.

Every 25 years or so the Fealareen leader and the human leader fight a duel to determine if the Fealareen will be released from the mountains until the time for the next duel. The Fealareen are really too few in number to wreak much havoc in that time and, aside from some raiding and the burning of a village or two, probably would not present a threat to the world at large. But, boy, the stories about the last time they were free are real winners.

With your map in hand, and an idea of the races you are going to allow in your world, you can start plunking populations into nations. I've restricted the Dhesiri to the more temperate zones of the world. The Fealareen live in their small mountain range, while the Dwarves are found in the two largest mountain ranges (the Darkesh and the mountains of Ell). There are probably other populations of them scattered about, but these are the best known. The Aelves and Xne'kal live in Woodholm in the west and The Forests in the east. That leaves lots of room for humans.

Cultures

Where there are living, sentient people, and for the sake of discussion we will include humans, an almost infinite number of different cultures will develop. Creating and fleshing out the cultures of all the different peoples at once is an overwhelming task, but there is a simple solution.

Don't do it all at once. See, that was easy.

Seriously, no one can be expected to put everything together in one fell swoop. It's too large a job, so take it in steps and slowly build your world up. The largest advantage to this method of operation is that it allows you creative flexibility.

You can see that the Aelves in my world have, if stories are true, a beautiful society where all is gorgeous and spiritual, heaven on earth. I guess that's true; I don't know. The Xne'kal were created specifically to keep people away from the Aelves until I've had a chance to work on them. Dwarves are scarce because I haven't finalized their culture. I don't know if they are tribal or clannish. Because of that I'm forced to be vague about them, which does not present a problem until characters get to the Dwarves. I should have ample warning to work on the problem.

OK, now that we all agree that we don't have to hatch a world full of cultures all at once, how do we build cultures? Easy - you steal, synthesize or extrapolate from fiction or the world in general.

Theft is easiest. Imperiana is a feudal nation of thees, thous and knights in plate armor. It has fertile green valleys, deep forests and old castles. It used to be the capital province of an empire that has been dead for 1,000 years now, and the people from Imperiana view those of other nations as being beneath them. In general it could be medieval "Germany" before the unification under Prussia, with a bit of arrogance thrown in for good measure.

With theft, the design work has been done for you. If I want to, I can buy a big picture-book on castles of Germany, or the Black Forest, and have visual aids to use in the game. If I want to go really nuts, I'll read up on German history or folktales and will freely adapt some political or fictional situation into a scenario. Such aids can really help a beginning GM or a GM who is forced to run a game before he is really prepared for it. Don't you just hate it when someone's out-of-town cousin wants to play in your world, but if the adventure isn't outside the current campaign it will spoil everything?

Synthesis is a bit harder, but is very effective. Robert Howard and Edgar Rice Burroughs were very good at this sort of thing. The question at the heart of synthesis is this: "I wonder what would have happened if [one historical culture] met [another historical culture]."

What if the Mongol hordes had crossed the Pacific and spread across North America? The mind boggles at the concept. For one thing I don't think we'd have Thanksgiving as a holiday. In fact there might be Puritan reservations in New England and Spanish colonies wherever the Mongols found it too hot to live. Regardless of the changes in this world, the concept is valid for fantasy world design. Imagine your Elves with a samurai code of honor, or Dwarves with the skills of ninja and as rabidly religious as Moslems!

Do some research into cultures in this world, to learn how traits develop naturally, and then see how they would change when they enter your world. Making your pirates into samurai on the sea is fine. Single combat to decide battles makes sense, especially if seamen are highly skilled individuals and there are very few of them. If you do synthesize a culture, try to make sure the most obvious aspect is logical. There is no reason for a tribe in a rain forest to be as stingy with water as the Fremen of Dune.

Extrapolation is my favorite technique because it allows me to take one aspect of a setting and explore it rather fully. From some minor detail I can build up a culture, and make it interesting if I have any luck at all. The culture in Daar is a good example of this idea.

I wanted Daari people to be memorable. I remembered that in certain places on this world, scarring and tattooing are expected of all people in the culture. This tends to happen on a tribal level. As it is memorable, I selected it as the aspect of the Daari to be explored. The first thing I asked myself was, "Why do they scar themselves?" Since I was building a fantasy world, I decided it was for magical reasons. Soon I decided that the Daari scar the right side of their faces only. At dusk they face south. The demons of night, who are devouring the sun in the west, will see their fierce profiles and be frightened away from that nation during the night's adventures.

Simple description and reason. Everyone will remember these people with half their faces scarred with circles, curves and symbols. Still, the reason *behind* the scarring affects all people from Daar. Consequently all Daari are very hostile toward demons and those they believe to be possessed. Each Daari warrior has a "demon spear," a short spear meant for killing demons or

the "possessed." They view the destruction of demons as a holy rule, and pursue this mission to almost totally irrational ends.

Suddenly, from examining the consequences of a small detail, a culture begins to form itself. I don't really need to take it any further at this point. What is above is enough. In Daar the society is tribal; the people are united in their hatred of demons. Different tribes and villages happen to think other villages are full of demon kin, so there is little chance of organizing the nation into anything truly effective. But there is a king and a council of tribes in the capital.

The Daari, incredibly suspicious of anyone from the outside, are portrayed as xenophobic. Periodic riots through the foreign section of the capital result in the killing of "possessed" outsiders.

The most important aspect, as far as I'm concerned, to creating races and cultures for your world is to have enough to spin stories from. Once you can have a tavern keeper say, "Well, old Fred over there claims he was a Darkesh bandit about 20 years ago, but you know how those Daari lie," you have established enough background for your world to begin planning adventures.

Character Creation

Characters are, of course, the heart of any adventure. They are the windows through which the players will see your world, and they are the tools the players will use to affect your world. They are very important, but all too often they are given the least amount of thought in a campaign.

Once upon a time, before campaigns or characters were important, I used to do demonstration games with up to 34 characters in an adventure. In four hours I'd run those characters through a dungeon run that would leave bunches of them rich, a few dead and almost all of them changed to some slight degree. But that was easy. I was only going to see those characters once in my life and they were all beginning characters. In a campaign, that sort of cavalier approach does not work.

A campaign needs characters who fit in and understand the world. This can be accomplished rather easily, but will take some work on the part of both you and the players.

You must first decide how much input you will allow the players to have. Even apparently free choice for the players, however, will have some measure of GM control. If, for example, a player wants to run a character from an alternate dimension, when you had decided there *weren't* alternate dimensions in your campaign, you can veto the idea outright, or have the player provide a tremendously great story to explain it - and explain back to him how much it will cost.

If you work with each player on character creation, you can gently steer the group toward what you consider an appropriate blend of races, nationalities and abilities. Encourage players to explore character types they haven't tried before.

Or you can do it all yourself. Decide what sort of a group mix you want. If one or more characters will be of exotic race, you should decide who is best suited to play that type of character.

If there are going to be multiple nationalities, the Game Master should also choose the person appropriate to that role.

Assume your world has a samurai culture, a "barbarian" culture and a medieval Italian culture. Handing the samurai or the Venetian character to a player whose idea of subtlety is hitting something *softly* can be a mistake. Give the roles to people who can play them but, by all means, define the roles so each player has to work at the character. Nothing is worse than forever handing the generic barbarian to the same person game after game.

In the past I've prepared sheets describing the character's nation, national philosophy and history, and national preference in weapons. A player entering the game reads that and creates a character that fits within that national background, or as above, explains why that character is an exception to the norm. The player then writes up the history of his character, and, if I am lucky, leaves enough gaps in his background that I can fill things in. One of the best histories I ever received described a character who, at the age of 15, wandered into some haunted mountains and was lost for three weeks. He remembered nothing of that sojourn. I was more than happy to fill the gap for him, though his character did not learn what really happened until much later.

Once I have all the descriptions and histories of the characters, I read and compare them. I look for similarities and common experiences. One character's father was an explorer who went into the Darkesh. Another character, a Dwarf, came from the Darkesh; his father was involved in quashing a bandit raid on a caravan. There I could forge a link. I let one character's family history overlap with another's family history. Once I've done this for all the characters, I rewrite their histories and give them back.

The new histories supply details and clues to the world, and often provide motivations for the characters. The explorer father told his daughter, the player's character, father that she has a half-brother somewhere in Leth. She lives in Hanrith and wants to find her kin to share her father's meager estate with him. Little does she know that her half-brother thinks he is the son of the king of Leth and has his eye on the throne. Ah well, of such things are adventures made.

I do not hesitate to supply some characters with secret information or purposes that might force one character to kill another. Grath, a man who says he's from Ditaan, might actually be a poisoner from Memkar who wants to kill the Crown Prince of Leth. That will present problems for the woman from Hanrith, but unless she plays sharp and Grath makes a mistake, she probably won't know that until it's too late.

Many players object, of course, to this type of GM manipulation. In this example, the GM may provide either a last-minute reprieve from death for the half-brother or an overriding motivation for the Hanrith woman to continue dealing with Grath - assuming, of course, that he wants to please his gamers!

I have also encouraged players to reveal only information they think the others *need* to know. If the people of Hanrith have no love for the folks from Aziz, there is no reason they'd share information damaging to their own national image. It makes no sense. One way to train a player to do this is to give his character a magical item that allows him to inflict whatever trap has just

befallen him on another party member, through the wink of an eye to the GM. If he tells anyone else about the item, the party will want him to get rid of it. But if he stays quiet, it might just save his life, and perhaps only cost the party that loudmouth Daari troublemaker.

Gather the characters together in a logical manner. Have all of them book passage on the same ship, or have them get burned out of the same roadhouse. I've always favored religious festivals, with people from all over the world gathered in one place, as an excuse to bring natives to one spot.

Once you have the characters together, you can begin your adventures.

One quick note about replacement characters. Go through the process of creating a character and ease him into the party. There should be more reason to his joining a quest in progress than "You find another fighter in the tavern common room in the morning." It is much more entertaining, and more reasonable, to say, "Framed in the doorway is a huge warrior in full mail. He points at Zian the Dwarf and says, 'I've tracked thee from the Darkesh. Now thou shalt die.'" Once someone subdues him, the warrior can learn that Zian didn't do what he is accused of, but that the quest he is on will supply the answers this cretin wants. Then the warrior can join the group and fit in. He'll have a purpose, which is more than most characters in campaigns.

Plots

You've created a wonderful world, populated it with magical creatures and have chronicled a host of historical events to give it depth. All the characters in your campaign have been given backgrounds and you've supplied each of them with a goal or two in life. Everything is ready for you to start play, with the possible exception of something for the characters to do. You need a plot.

Plotting is something that escapes many Game Masters, and an author or two, yet is crucial to ensuring the game works. The world is where the characters are going to act. The characters are the forces that will act upon the world, and hopefully be changed themselves in the process. The plot, then, is a series of events that forces the characters to act upon the world.

Writers have argued for centuries about the number of plots there are for stories. The lists vary in length and detail, but all of them revolve around the same themes.

My list has only five plots on it: Man versus Man, Man versus Society, Man versus Self, Man versus Nature, and Man versus Supernatural. That's it, those are the conflicts at the heart of any adventure you will ever run. Working from that list will make everything in designing adventures a great deal easier.

Man versus Man is a fairly simple plot. Fred, a Barbarian, wants to avenge his family by hunting down and killing Gnarsh, an ogre. The two of them finally meet and only one walks away from the encounter. It is easy to put into any game, provided you lay the proper groundwork, and it can lead to many great things.

Assume you want to inflict that plot on Fred. In working up his character you let the player know that his family was slain in an ogre raid. Fred remembers little of it because he was young, but frozen in his mind is the image of one ogre with gold eyes and

red hair.

Fred, having reached manhood, meets the other adventurers as he sets out to find the ogre who killed his family.

The first wrinkle we throw in is that he does not know the ogre's name. He might have to hunt up a member of the party or two just to track that information down. Once he has the name he'll have to locate the ogre.He learns, let us say, that Gnarsh is living in the free city of Bantil. In Bantil, all past sins are forgiven if the citizen is willing to lead a productive and peaceful life.

Well, Fred's planned revenge has hit a snag. He'll have to take on the whole city of Bantil to get Gnarsh (Man versus Society). The party has to figure out a way to a) kidnap the ogre, b) kill the ogre, or c) "prove" the ogre is in the city to plan a robbery of the city's treasury and thus get him exiled. The thunderfisted barbarian will have to act peacefully and control himself if he is going to succeed in forcing Gnarsh out of the city.

I think at this point you should be able to see how the plots begin to weave together. Later on we can throw a curve into the works by having Gnarsh, on his deathbed, reveal that a wizard had paid for the murder of Fred's family because of an ancient prophecy about his bloodline.

The party tracks down the wizard, a few weeks' adventure in itself, and learns, after fighting a host of supernatural creatures and foul magics, that if Fred stands on Lizard Point at dawn on the longest day of the year, a lost continent will rise up and Fred will be proclaimed its ruler.

All of this action needs to be fueled with additional plots, or subplots. Subplots are plots that are not as important as the main plot, but help develop characters and solve the main plot in the adventure. In the above example another member of the party might believe that the wizard that paid Gnarsh is his father. He won't want to reveal that fact to Fred for obvious reasons, but finding the wizard may be just as important to him as it is to Fred.

Subplots may well develop through the game. One of my favorites involves a "stranger" who shows up in the towns where the party stops along their way. Assume one member of the party spends a great deal of time playing cards. This "stranger" will sit in on various games and will always walk away a winner.

The stranger never needs to say anything to the party, and most often just walks away with the money. Eventually, though, the character who loses the money will need to satisfy his curiosity as to the identity of this stranger. And that need can spark off a whole line of adventures for the party.

The toughest aspect to handling a plot is watching the characters shred it and twist it away from your intended end. You intend for the characters, eventually, to find the sword and slay the dragon, which rescues the Princess and will result in her marriage to the Emperor of the East. Peace will reign in the world. Sounds fair, but chances are your players will never get there.

Plots have to evolve from the characters. If the goal in life for my character is to find, study and compile a book on wildflowers, and no one can convince me that there is a new strain of daffodils in Xitia, there is no way my character will go there. It is not important to him, so there is no reason for him to go along. If, on the other hand, my character can be convinced that there

is a legendary plant ready to sprout one of its once-a-century blossoms in Xitia, nothing this side of death could keep him away.

All too often, a GM feels the need to force characters in one direction or another to complete his plot. While it is scary to settle yourself for a marathon adventure and to have the players opt to sit in the tavern and drink all night, let the game take the direction natural for it. If you want the characters to find the sword that will kill the dragon, make that goal important to them. Give them a dare, offer them riches or create a dangerous situation that makes moving toward your goal preferable to the alternatives.

I want to urge Game Masters to be subtle. A friend of mine defined subtlety as something where "if you think it's subtle, it's too obvious." You don't need to go to exquisite lengths to disguise your purposes, but you don't need to hammer them home for the gamers either.

If I wanted characters to go off and find the sword to slay the dragon, I'd approach it from two directions. First the bard in the tavern would sing a song about the immortal dragon that feared only the sword "Dragon-death." The song would reveal that no hero had ever rescued the blade from the hoard where it lay buried. I would also note, in casual conversation in the tavern, that the dragon's voracious appetite had forced some Dhesiri colonies into the local area. If greed did not motivate the characters to get the sword, then being hip-deep in Dhesiri probably would.

This is the place where a "hook" is really important. The Game Master dangles some tidbit of information out there for the players to toy with. It might be a series of rumors, delivered over a course of weeks, that indicates the dragon is sitting on a hoard of gold the like of which has never been seen before. Conversely, it might be idle speculation about the color of the dragon, or someone asking if you'd seen Thangar the Bloody since he headed off to get the dragon.

Any information that might intrigue the characters and lure them into an adventure is a hook. The fact, in my world, that no one knows why the Xne'kal hate outsiders is a hook. The quest for the answer to that question, as difficult as it might be, may kill several characters. Use good bait and you'll get anyone into any adventure you design.

Ultimately, if the players did not go after the sword to kill the dragon, I'd let it ride. That plot can always be saved. Eventually someone will have to rescue the Princess, and if the party has to fight through a province full of Dhesiri to do it later, that was their choice. The trick is not to be vindictive. Just let life continue as it logically would if the characters do not act. If a change would be too drastic, you can forestall it. After all, there has to be more than one group of heroes in any fantasy world. If your players don't act the part, someone else will do the job.

One last note on plotting is really in order here. All too often the plots presented in gaming are plots that save the world. This is difficult to handle.

In a local superhero campaign, we had a large number of GMs running adventures. One GM would constantly put us in situations where the fate of the world hung in the balance. If we

failed, though, the Game Master would intervene, through some outside force, to prevent our failure from destroying the world.

This was bad because we knew, in the end, that no matter what we did or tried to do, our actions would not affect the world. It was depressing to play hard and fast for three hours, get trapped, and have the Green Lantern Corps show up to prevent the world from being blown apart. Heck, if the Green Lanterns were going to do that in the end, why were we involved in the fight in the first place?

Another GM, on the other hand, presented us with world-shattering adventures where we were certain the world *would* be destroyed if we did not succeed. I remember all of us, on one particular adventure, being prepared to sacrifice our characters to keep a sorcerer away from a device of great power. We'd faced his forces before, and knew we were history, but we had to sell our lives dearly and buy time for others in our group to destroy the device. If we did not, we all realized the world as we knew it would be gone forever.

In short, make your threats real and back them up. If you tell the players that Kiara the Sorcerer intends to raise the first Emperor from the grave, which will result in massive civil wars throughout the Empire, it had better do that if they fail to stop her. Sure, you can alter the consequences to reflect partial success or failure, but don't make the consequence into an idle threat.

The second your players say, "What difference does it make? The world won't end," you know you've lost them.

It's your world. You've built it and you certainly don't want to see it destroyed. Keep your adventures interesting and start them small. As the characters get more powerful, you can give them nastier challenges. Keep an eye on what you see as the logical outcome of success or failure of a particular scenario or plot line, and tailor the scenario so the ending is something you could live with. Be alert for the odd wrinkles the characters will throw in.

Above all, don't be afraid of change in your world. Welcome it and work with it. If a character makes a lucky shot and kills off a villain you had planned to use in the next three adventures, congratulate the hero and, after a suitable amount of time, work the adventures through the villain's subordinate or rival. There's more than one way to skin a cat.

If you follow the ideas outlined above, are willing to do some hard work, and can feel proud of the enjoyment your players get in your world, as opposed to pride in your own cleverness, you will have a campaign without equal. Your world will live and breathe. The characters in your campaign will grow and exist, and you and your friends will have fun for lifetimes on end.

About the author: Mike Stackpole is a renowned game designer and author of fiction; he is best known for his Battletech and Dark Conspiracy novels. Mike's game credits include Mercenaries, Spies and Private Eyes and a large chunk of Justice, Inc. as well as Wasteland and Bard's Tale III for the digital gaming medium. He just completed a new novel for Bantam entitled Once a Hero. He said his agent would like us mentioning that.

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